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SUBJECT: TURKEY: PROMINENT KURDISH INTELLECTUAL URGES U.S. SUPPORT FOR TURKISH DEMOCRATIZATION, RAPPROCHEMENT WITH NORTHERN IRAQ

Classified By: Classified by Adana PO Eric Green for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. Summary: (C) In a meeting with Adana PO, prominent Kurdish author Mehmet Uzun urged the U.S. to establish a permanent military presence in Northern Iraq to protect the democratic advances of the KRG, which he believes will catalyze liberalization elsewhere in the region. He discounted the prospect of an incursion into Iraq by Turkish forces, claiming that the current troop build-up is a product of Turkish internal politics -- namely, the struggle between modernizing, democratic forces and the military. Turkey's democratic deficit is the principal reason for the perpetuation of the Kurdish problem in Turkey, which will ultimately be resolved through the country's modernization, he said. Uzun blamed both the PKK and the state for prolonging their conflict, which has also stalled the achievement of further democratic and cultural rights for Turkey's Kurds. Uzun's opinions accurately mirror the views of Turkey's leading Kurdish intellectuals. End summary.

¶2. (C) On June 15 we met in Diyarbakir with Mehmet Uzun, the world's foremost living Kurdish author, who has devoted much of his life to guaranteeing the survival of Kurmanji, the main Kurdish dialect, though he has also published works in Turkish and other languages. After being jailed in Turkey for publishing a Kurdish-language journal, Uzun spent nearly 30 years in exile in Sweden, returning to Turkey in 2005. He is currently undergoing chemotherapy (successful, thus far) after being diagnosed with cancer last year.

¶3. (C) Uzun spent most of the meeting talking about politics, though did mention his admiration for Faulkner, Toni Morrison and Saul Bellow. He is well informed about current events and has spent time in Northern Iraq, where he met with Barzani and senior members of his government.

Northern Iraq: An Historic Milestone

¶4. (C) Uzun heaped praise on the U.S. for liberating Iraq and calling attention to the need for democratization in the region. By protecting the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the U.S. has helped midwife the birth of a society that is democratic and protects the rights of minorities, including Turkomans and Assyrian Christians. He noted that modernization in the Arab world -- as well as in Turkey -- depends on spreading democracy and that the KRG provides a powerful example for neighboring countries. He urged the U.S. or NATO to establish a permanent military presence in the region to protect these gains and prevent outside forces from threatening the KRG. The greatest threats to Northern Iraq, he said, come from Turkey and Iran, not from the other parts of Iraq. During the Saddam era, he noted, many Iraqi opposition leaders (who now run Iraq) took refuge in the mountains of Kurdistan and they enjoy close relations with the Kurdish leaders.

¶5. (C) Uzun believes the current threats by Turkey to go after the PKK in Northern Iraq are largely part of the "chess game" of internal Turkish politics, pitting Ankara's military-bureaucratic elite against democratic forces that want to modernize and Europeanize Turkey. But while the Turkish military understands that an intervention would be a disaster, they are both contemptuous of the KRG's achievements and fear those same achievements will nourish democratic developments inside Turkey.

¶6. (C) Uzun pointed out that the Erdogan government is interested in working collaboratively with the KRG but has been blocked from doing so by the Turkish military. If the Turkey-Northern Iraq relationship improves, so too will the life of Turkey's Kurds. Barzani, he said, recognizes that the PKK is a liability to Kurdish aspirations and is prepared to work with the GOT to end the conflict, but cannot do so without assistance from Ankara. In some ways, it seems the top leadership within both the Turkish military and the PKK are working together to prolong this conflict, Uzun said.

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¶7. (C) Regarding the continuing struggle for expanded Kurdish cultural and political rights within Turkey, Uzun remarked that he has never supported violence and that now, more than ever, Turkey's Kurds will be best served by working exclusively within the political process. He added, however, that the PKK cannot be defeated militarily; the GOT needs a political exit strategy. Uzun noted that even Mehmet Agar, a Turkish politician who was a hard-line police chief in the 1990s, has called for PKK fighters to be allowed to come down from the mountains and participate in politics. Meanwhile, he lamented that a new generation of Kurds is growing up without hope: "Ninety percent of our high-school graduates can't go to university or find jobs. So they sit in teahouses and watch ultra-nationalists degrading them on TV.

What do you expect them to do?"

The Deep-State Cancer  
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¶8. (C) A democratic deficit is at the heart of the Kurdish issue and of Turkey's problems generally, Uzun said. The current struggle in Ankara is all about a military-bureaucratic elite trying to cling to its power to run the country. "This deep state," he said, "is an even worse cancer for Turkey than the tumor inside my body." Turkey is being ruled with an ideology that has not evolved and adapted sufficiently in its 80-year history. Uzun was optimistic that it will change: "Modernization and westernization must and will continue. Our future is with the west, with Europe."

¶9. (C) Uzun also blamed visceral anti-Kurdish sentiments within the Turkish establishment for the relentless legal harassment of Kurdish politicians. In Diyarbakir, the people overwhelmingly elected Osman Baydemir, a Kurd, as mayor. In response, the judiciary has opened over 100 indictments against him for "offenses" such as using a Kurdish phrase on his annual holiday card. The previous day, a district mayor in Diyarbakir had been dismissed from office for offering multilingual services to his constituents (many of whom speak no Turkish). These elements of the state, Uzun stated, remain intent on stamping out individuality and cultural diversity in Turkey.

Comment  
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¶10. (C) Uzun's views are worthy of attention as they closely reflect those of Turkey's leading Kurdish intellectuals, human rights lawyers, journalists, leaders of NGOs and moderate elements of Kurdish political parties. Kurdish intellectuals are perhaps the only constituency in Turkey still favorably disposed towards the U.S., which they credit with liberating their brethren in Northern Iraq and advocating for continued liberalization within Turkey. In the coming months the GOT will face critical decisions on Northern Iraq: whether to continue its policy of denial and isolation or reconcile itself to reality and work cooperatively with the KRG on common economic and political interests. Turkey's choice will determine not only its ability to positively influence events in the region, but also whether it can establish trust with its own Kurdish population.

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